Performing Authenticity and the Gendered Labor of Dance

Susan Leigh Foster

In the U.S. we have experienced a recent explosion of dance on television, from sit-coms that focus on families whose children take ballet lessons to reality shows about dancers’ lives to spectacles that feature dance performed in many genres harnessed to enflame celebratory competition among contestants. All these shows present two kinds of choreography: one that is featured in the dancing itself and one that is accomplished through the framing created by the camera and the post-performance editing. Regardless of the type of dancing that is being performed, the camera angles and the editing transform the dancing into an altogether different genre and experience of dance.

Along with this profusion of televised dance shows, there has been a subtle shift in dance’s relation to labor. As recently as twenty years ago, dance was most often located as either an artistic pursuit whose economy lay outside and beyond the world of conventional commerce, or alternatively, as a form of pleasure that diverted or replenished the laboring body. Now, dance is itself frequently validated as a form of labor, and dancers’ efforts to perform to their maximum are seen alongside a range of other commitments that manufacture an authentic dedication to work. This essay looks specifically at one such example of this new construction of dance as a form of labor, the immensely popular and globally circulating series So You Think You Can Dance? I will focus especially on how this show constructs its version of dance as a hyper-authentic pursuit and analyze the ways that gender plays into this construction.

Currently showing in twenty-three different countries, So You Think is a television franchise that in its first season in 2005 attracted over ten million viewers. Although subsequent ratings in the U.S. have declined, the show continues to enjoy widespread popularity, averaging 6 million viewers in 2010 and 4.16 million in its most recent season. Created by British producers Simon Fuller (who also created the Idol television franchise) and Nigel Lythgoe (producer of the Idol series and also one of the judges on So You Think), the show begins the season with an overview documentary of auditions held in various cities. On each subsequent episode dancers compete in a variety of dance genres such as hip-hop, tango, and expressive, and they are slowly eliminated by a panel of judges, some guest and others consistent throughout the season. Each episode consists of the dancers’ performances and also footage of their rehearsals and short, intimate autobiographical portraits of them talking about their lives.

Along with several other televised dance competitions, including The Ultimate Dance Battle, Live to Dance/Got to Dance, America’s Best Dance Crew, and Superstars of Dance, So You Think is bringing dance to entirely new audiences across a range of class and ethnic affiliations. Not only do millions of viewers watch these shows, but there is also a large community of on-line spectators who engage in intense post-performance conversations about the dancers’ abilities and the judges’ decisions. Debate ranges among topics such as the potential racial bias of the judges
and their homophobia as well as the difference between choreography and performance, with most comments focusing on the hard work of the dancers and their willingness to give everything they have to their performance.

**Dance as affective labor**

The phrases dance as labor, or the labor of dance are at one level oxymoronic, especially when comparing their stereotypic representations: labor is alienated whereas dance is completely engaged; labor is productive, that is, it produces things whereas dance is non-productive and vanishes as it is performed; labor is useful unlike dance which is not useful; and labor is hard and dull unlike dance which is easy, spontaneous, sexy, and fun. However, new developments in the organization of the work place and new theorizations of the nature of labor within the global economy may make it possible to think productively about what it would mean to approach dance as a form of labor and also to envision what dance can say about the act of laboring that might help us to understand better what work is.

A variety of scholars who are investigating new work practices in an effort to extend and expand Marx’s theories of labor agree that we have moved from a Fordist model of workplace organization to what is sometimes called a Toyotaist model. In the Fordist model, which prevailed throughout the first half of the twentieth century, people generally made things, organized according to the most efficient production line models for how to assemble a product. The market received a standard number of these products based on estimates of demand. In contrast, the Toyotaist model places much more emphasis on the interface between producer and consumer, with a closer attention to customizing orders and anticipating desire for variations and alternatives. Factories no longer issue a standard number of products but instead retain almost no inventory in order to remain flexible and sensitive to consumers’ changing demands. Companies work at generating demand as well as meeting it by devoting added resources to the process of creating demand for a product.

As part of this shift, companies not only allocate more resources to interfacing with the public, but they also ask of their employees a different level and quality of engagement with the company. In the Fordist model, employees were often treated like machines, but their private life, consisting in their leisure time and their passions and beliefs were not affected. In the Toyotaist model, employees are asked to contribute more than physical labor; they are required to innovate, make decisions, and work effectively as a team. As a result, they do not leave work and come home, but instead continue to work at some level nonstop. The fact that workers are being asked to contribute collectively to the production of goods and services has begun to reweave the fabric of the social, from one based in the

---

distinction between public and private spaces to one in which networks of associations and the advantages they may offer to move ahead now function as the organizing force in most daily interactions. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe it, we have transitioned from a society in which there are factories to a factory society in which the entire social performs as a factory.  

Within first-world economies, not only has the Toyotaist model come to dominate material production, but new technologies and services have been introduced such that now a vast portion of the work force is engaged in what is being called “immaterial” and “affective” labor. Industries employing immaterial labor include advertising, entertainment, tourism, software, and health and fitness, to name but a few. Some of these sectors include a large number jobs devoted to making the customer feel better.  

Concomitant with these changes in first-world economies, as Botansky and Chiapelo argue, we are experiencing a deep longing for the authentic. Society is marked by a shortening of lengths of relationships, fragility of employment, a disappointment of aspirations, and a crumbling of social bonds. There is a pervasive inability to project oneself into the future. The marketplace is glutted with goods and services, resulting in a sense that everybody is selling something, and everybody is buying the same thing. There is nothing individual anymore; everything is the same and hence everyone’s desire for it is also the same. Initially, capitalism’s response to this phenomenon, called massification, was to personalize goods and services more; to shorten the life-span of goods, and to invade domains, such as tourism and personal fitness, that had not yet been commodified. But this has resulted not only in a constant need for new sources of authenticity but also a genuine anomie or cultural malaise around the impossibility of the authentic. As Iles and Vishmidt note, “All labor has become aesthetic self-creation and, at the same time, formerly unalienated activities have been subsumed by capitalist social relations as never before.”

The current longing for and lack of belief in the authentic is also the result of the fact that there are no unmotivated personal relationships. There has been an erosion of a distinction between the personal (operating under a sign of non-interest) and the professional (operating under a sign of interest). Facebook, with its opportunities for self-fashioning and for creating communities around “liking” and “disliking,” is a kind of technological embodiment of this erosion as is, equally, the use of human plants (individuals masquerading as normal citizens who promote specific events and commodities) to advertise products. There is an urgent need for

---


3 See, for example: Lazzarato (1996), Hardt (1999), Virno (2003), Vishmidt (2011)


relationships based on trust, but this is simultaneously compromised by the potential for relationships to generate networks of profits.

The recent explosion of televised dance spectacles can be seen as located within and also as providing a response to this transformation of labor practices. These shows perform immaterial labor insofar as they create entertainment, offer an opportunity to network through blogging and in some cases voting on the performances. They also lubricate the passage from the danced segments to the advertisements that regularly punctuate the show. In the edits that alternate among studio rehearsal, live performance, and audience response, the shows also put forward a strong work ethic. They valorize improvement at dancing by focusing on the difficulties of learning new routines and orienting the judges’ comments towards any noticeable expansion of technical and performance skills.

Unlike other forms of competition, however, these dance spectacles do something more. Through the medium of dancing, long associated with an emotional investment in self-expression and with expressing an emotional self, these performances produce a hyper-authenticity. Each dancer gives his or her all, emotionally and physically, as documented through the camera’s ability to shoot from underneath the jump in order to give it added height, to travel at rapid speed in order to show the force of the dancer’s trajectory through space, and to zoom in on the teary or joyous face of the dancer, moved by the fervency of his or her own performance.

Thus, not only the labor of the dancer but also his or her dedication to dancing are commandeered by the show’s format. The dancer’s eager willingness to persevere as well as his or her faith in dance itself are commodified through the relentless repetition of the types of dances performed and the types of comments offered in response. For So You Think each dancer’s style and approach are initially unique, and when they audition for the series, they are selected on the basis of their own choreography and performance. What counts is not only their fervent dedication to dancing and their potential to excel in terms of virtuoso performance, but also the originality of their presentation. However, once they are accepted into the competition, they all receive the same training in the same genres of dance, and perform the same sorts of routines. Furthermore, what they learn to perform are partner dances rather than the solos that they originally submitted for consideration.

All this is vividly and succinctly illustrated in the 90-minute overview of auditions for the 9th season of So You Think available from Fox online. Each of the

---

6 According to Lythgoe, tap will never prevail as a standard genre for competition on So You Think because there is not a sufficient number of practitioners for it to be generally accessible, thereby assuring that a tap dancer would never get to do their own style in the finals. This belies an underlying contradiction of the program that all dancers should be good at every (designated) genre, but they must also truly excel in their own principal training regimen. "So You Think You Can Dance: Nigel Lythgoe talks tap": http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCxeaLwMuuQ, Accessed February 13, 2013.

contestants that is accepted into the competition shows a remarkable talent at exploring his or her own version of dancing, including one dancer who devised a genre he calls "exorcist style," and which he describes as drawing out of the viewers all the hate and suffering that they feel in their lives, and, through processing it within his own body, he transforms it into a benign energy that he returns to the theater. His performance at the audition reduced judge Mary Murphy to tears and prompted Nigel Lythgoe to announce that he didn’t care what the other judges thought; he would personally pay for the dancer’s ticket to Las Vegas, where the competition was being held. At the end of this and each successful dancer’s audition, however, the dancer, with airplane ticket in hand, explodes out the door towards the camera in a display of ebullient enthusiasm, proclaiming loudly, “I’m going to Vegas!” What had been utterly unique is already transformed into a standardized routine infused with the hyper-authentic personal enthusiasm of each dancer.

Once the dancers enter into the regimen of preparation for the show, their skill at learning choreography, rather than creating it, becomes paramount. Those who advance in the competition must show elegance of lines plus passionate-ness and also a marked growth in skills at dancing and performing. Those who have “grown the most” have a better chance of continuing in the series than those who do not. Thus the remarkable uniqueness and individuality with which they entered the audition process are steadily replaced by sameness, and yet the sameness demands a constant suffusion of the individual’s earnest commitment to dancing. The popularity of the show is thereby secured through this commodification of authenticity that results from the earnest hard work of the dancers.

The new industrial body

I see So You Think as part of a larger trend in dance these days that is cultivating what I call the industrial body. Although economists argue convincingly that we are living in a post-industrial economy, I want to underscore the body’s participation in the production of affective labor by naming its work after the entertainment conglomerates that produce it, known affectionately here in Hollywood (where I live) as “the industry.” By categorizing these kinds of performances as industrial, I hope to underscore the complicity of media and performance in the manufacture of new forms of commodities. The industrial body performs primarily on screen in music videos and in dance competitions, where it celebrates the assimilation of many local styles and flavors of dance into a homogeneous affirmation of youth and heterosexuality. The industrial body has acquired, with its expanding popularity, a more extensive training program, one that adapts quickly to new styles in fashion, movement, and activities in popular culture. Schooled in a mishmash of traditions, including hip-hop, Broadway jazz, and occasionally, ballet, gymnastics, tap, and martial arts, the industrial body is most concerned with its appearance from a front defined by the camera’s position. Like its colleague the balletic body, it consults the mirror regularly and assiduously. Yet, where the balletic body thrives on sacrifice and the transcendence of pain produced during training, the industrial body energizes in
response to the appeal of work and sweat. It revels in selling the illusive vitality that is promised when one buys something. Immensely popular world-wide, as the result of televised dance competitions Bollywood, MTV, and other venues, the industrial body is making strong inroads into conceptions of the value of dance as jubilant labor.\(^8\)

The industrial body’s center of gravity is located in the pelvis and close to the ground. Then the body is lifted up and out of that center by the demands of spectacle to be more extended and larger in every direction, but this body always takes with it a commitment to the low-down. Unlike the balletic body that endeavors to mask the amount of physical work that any move exacts from the body, the industrial body glows with the appetite to “work it out.” The balletic body endeavors to “rise above” the effort entailed in dancing whereas the industrial body dives right in, reveling in that effort. For example, the industrial body typically ends its routine with a triumphant stance that signals accomplishment at having truly dedicated oneself to the dancing, and this sweaty, grinning, defiant finish always wins applause.

A second principle feature of the industrial body is the way that it foregrounds a highly gendered sexiness. Every move endeavors to put forward the sexual vitality of the dancers as an integral part of their identity and as an important motivation for dancing. Unlike the balletic body, that represses the sexual, obscuring desire within geometry, the industrial body revels in the display of its sexual appeal. Dancers’ hands slide across their own flesh or that of their partners as if to emphasize and reinforce the sensuality of their bodies and their own willingness to explore it.

As a body that performs for a camera or as if a camera were present, the industrial body consistently orients forward, such that even when it turns to the side, its profile is emphasized as the silhouette of the body that can be seen from the front. The industrial body loves unison, has little interest in diagonals, prefers to do moves to one side and then the other in order to foreground their rhythmic intricacy, and it locates itself symmetrically in relation to others.

The industrial body assumes choreography to be the realization of the essence of a particular genre of dance. Something called “contemporary” (which looks like lyrical jazz), along with hip-hop, tango, salsa, and jazz are the most

\(^8\) Consider, for example, the recent promotion material for Sachoom: "Motion IS, the all-dance musical that has been performed in Asia, Russia and the United Kingdom more than 2,000 times, and recently toured the U.S." According to the publicity, “It was the first Korean production presented at the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, receiving international acclaim and an award nomination. Hip-hop, jazz, contemporary dance, break dancing and more combine with brilliant visual images and vibrant music to tell the story of three friends - birth, loves, dreams, hard-work and achievement. The performers' passion connects with all nationalities and ages." The emphasis here on hard work in combination with passion as a universal characteristic of dance is typical of the way that the industrial body is represented more generally.

frequently danced forms. There is an underlying assumption that these forms are waiting to be realized in individually brilliant ways. Because shows like *So You Think You* strongly focus our attention on the amount of work that goes into learning the new routine or a new genre of dance, virtuosity becomes defined as the ability to be the most versatile in performing the essence of a range of forms or styles. The dancers are summoned to rise to the challenge of conquering all the technical demands of each form.

On *So You Think* and probably more generally in industry dance, dancers manifest a combination of traditional and new gendered identities. Female dancers exhibit an impressive amount of strength and toughness, although they are still lifted, pivoted, and balanced by men who are frequently put in the service of displaying the female dancer’s skill or passion. Because of the explicit focus on sexuality, of an exclusively heterosexual nature, female dancers frequently act out an aggressive appetite for sexual encounter, so much so that one of their main functions as dancers is to appear sexy and sexually available. In their other principle role, female dancers emote, most often acting out the immense joys or sorrows of being in a romantic relationship. The amount of ardor, dejection, longing, and dismay that they enact is incommensurate with their young age and the brevity of the two-minute dance in which all this emotion is revealed. Nonetheless, the performer’s ability or inability to convince viewers of the authenticity of these states of feeling is frequently remarked upon by the judges.

Male dancers exhibit an increased flexibility almost on a par with that of the female dancers. They also enact moments of vulnerability and tenderness, staged fleetingly within the overall scenario of romantic desire and conquest. More with the male dancers than the female dancers, the question of one’s sexual orientation looms large, given the men’s careful grooming, attention to fashion, and relentless politeness and enthusiasm. Perhaps this is why Lythgoe, in particular, repeatedly admonishes male dancers for not being masculine or manly enough. Male dancers must appear assertive and in control of their female partners, and female dancers, although tough and street savvy, must ultimately bend to their partners’ authority. All participants on *So You Think*, however, are required to sign contracts not to reveal their sexual orientation while participating on the show. Regardless of their sexual preferences, all dancers are drawn into a manic display of heteronormativity, one that relies on extremely traditional gendered behavior.

**Dancing as televisual presence**

In her study of reality television, Misha Kavka argues that it delivers the possibility for an intersubjectivity, a sense of privacy, and the experience of presentism. Reality television gathers viewers up into a community of engagement in which the domestic space of one’s own home becomes intimately connected both to what is seen on the screen and by extension to the other households that are also watching the show. A sense of temporal closeness to the events on screen is

---

achieved through the spatial proximity of the viewer to those events. Furthermore, the editing of shots from multiple camera angles dramatically expands the viewer’s singular point of view, combining the different viewpoints so as to create, what Kavka calls, “a sense of omniscience for each viewer.”\textsuperscript{10} The private space of one’s own home is thereby linked to an all-seeing eye. Live television, whether taped or not, also provides the illusion of occurring in real time, as if the people are simply doing what they would be doing whether or not the cameras were on and viewers were watching.\textsuperscript{11}

So You Think capitalizes on the format of reality television by providing four distinct kinds of access to the competition. Close-up shots of the contestants, judges, and audience members offer special access to the feelings of each person. Audience members, in particular, many of whom are former contestants on the show, are always captured in moments of thrilled approbation and highly emotional response to what they have just seen onstage. Contestants are also filmed in rehearsal, combining footage of their efforts and even failures to execute a movement properly with voice-over commentary from the dancers themselves and the choreographer about the challenges of the piece and the capacities of the dancers. It is in these scenes that So You Think offers most directly delivers what Kavka calls “the comfort and thrill of an intimacy with the ‘ordinary’ person, or a not-yet celebrity.”\textsuperscript{12} In addition to these rehearsal shots, contestants are filmed speaking directly to the camera about their own desires and commitment to dancing. Seemingly to occur in real time, these autobiographical reveries suture the viewer even closer to each dancer and construct a strong desire for that person to succeed. Finally, there is the filming of the actual dance performance in which the multiple cameras serve to boost the value of each moment in the choreography, whether it be the tight unison, the leaps and turns along the diagonal, or the emotional tenderness in a moment of partnering.

These four types of footage work synergistically to underscore the value of dance as hard work and the absolute necessity of remaining positive at all times. For example, even though the dancers are sometimes shown as failing to produce the desired choreography in rehearsal, this is followed directly by the footage of them succeeding in their performance of that same sequence during the competition. Their personal stories of travail likewise become connected to the audience members’ faces full of enthralled admiration and endless empathic engagement displaying tears, surprise, and overwhelming admiration. Dance thereby becomes a medium of relentless positiveness. One’s ability not to show disappointment is tied to being a beautiful dancer, and dance becomes a practice in which hard work pays off, even if there is only one final winner.

The editing of the different kinds of footage is so skillful that the show succeeds in setting up the premise that what one is watching is happening live. The cheering audience members and emcee who welcomes television viewers back after each commercial reinforce the suggestion that viewers are watching an evening at

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., P. 7  
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., P. 19  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., P. 24
the theater. The rehearsal and autobiographical segments are tucked in to the narrative arc of the competition in such a way as to simply be a part of the evening’s unfolding events. At the same time that the show offers this televisual presence, however, it also reiterates endlessly the same camera angles, shots, and edits. As a result, all the dances come to look remarkably similar to one another, and the progression of events feels routinized and repetitive, perhaps contributing to the steadily diminishing ratings that the show has received over the years.

Alienated dancing and hyper-authenticity

Seen from a post-Marxist perspective, dancers on *So You Think* have agreed to participate in certain protocols and comportment that, in a sense, alienate them from the kind of creative participation in dancing that they evidenced during the auditions. They sell their labor at dancing for a chance at stardom, performing set choreographies and styles with the best technical virtuosity they can muster and the most passion they can act out. Although they function in the rewarding capacity of performer, executing the choreographer’s vision, they, along with the choreographer, are subject to the disciplining syntax of the show as a televised spectacle. Each new dance is completed quickly, rehearsed efficiently, and presented in front of the lights and cameras that transform it into yet another performance rolling off the factory line. I would argue that in this process the dancers become increasingly estranged from their bodies. Then during the performance they seem suddenly able to transcend that estrangement through the sheer effort they put into dancing. They re-connect with their bodies in the moment of performance only to return to their alienated state afterwards. As a result, *So You Think* produces an addictive cycle of fulfillment and loss.

Regardless of their gender, dancers are required to display endless enthusiasm and boundless positiveness, despite the fact that they are competing with one another. Unlike a sports event, where an ethic of sportsmanly conduct informs athletes’ responses to success and failure, the cheeriness affected by *So You Think* contestants belies the multiple contradictions that they must continuously negotiate: they are supposed to compete to the fullest; not be upset by judges’ evaluations; support and cheer one another on, and be authentically enthusiastic the whole time, no matter what happens. As a result, they are never allowed to work through disappointment, to acknowledge wanting to beat out the other dancer, much less make evident the complicatedness of their relationships one to another. In this way, they re-produce the lack of distinction between motivated and unmotivated relationships that is pervasive in our culture, and indeed, they glamorize the ambiguity between the personal and the professional.

I find these demands on the dancers for a kind of emotional as well as physical labor in *So You Think* to be particularly disturbing, since they are masked over by the brilliant editing, the magnitude of the spectacle, and the sheer exuberance of the dancing. The promise that the show proffers -- to share and rejoice in witnessing the triumph of jubilant labor -- foments in the viewer the same cycle of addictive glee and subsequent alienation that marks the experience of the dancers. *So You Think* thus embodies at the same time that it creates the malaise of
our times.

**Works Cited**


